

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

historic SEABOARD COASTLINE BUILDING (PREFERRED) DHL File No. 124-53  
and or common Old City Hall

**2. Location**

street & number 1 High Street N/A not for publication  
city, town Portsmouth N/A vicinity of  
state Virginia code 51 county (city) code 124

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	N/A being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name Seaboard Coastline Associates  
street & number 1364 Air Rail Avenue  
city, town Virginia Beach N/A vicinity of Virginia 23455

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Portsmouth City Hall  
street & number 801 Crawford Parkway  
city, town Portsmouth Virginia 23704

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title Division of Historic Landmarks has this property been determined eligible? ☒ yes ☐ no  
File No. 124-53  
date 1985 ☐ federal ☒ state ☐ county ☐ local  
depository for survey records DIVISION OF HISTORIC LANDMARKS  
Department of Conservation & Historic Resources  
221 Governor Street  
city, town Richmond state Virginia 23219

## 7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date <u>N/A</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

### SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

The Seaboard Coastline Building is a five-story brick and concrete structure that once served as Portsmouth's central train station. The building is situated at the intersection of High and Water streets in downtown Portsmouth adjacent to the city's commercial waterfront along the southern branch of the Elizabeth River. It is sited parallel to the harbor, assuming an elongated footprint along a north-south axis. The distinctive half-round or semicylindrical profile of the front (north) elevation was intended to recall the imagery of the streamlined locomotives of the late 19th century. The principal pedestrian entrance into the terminal has always been through the arched openings in the center of the north elevation, while the former train shed extending off the south elevation provided covered access to the incoming and outgoing trains. The original brick facing of the exterior walls was parged with a white cementitious coating in 1972, giving the building the stuccoed appearance that it retains today.

### ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS

The original ink-on-linen construction drawings for the Seaboard Coastline Building have survived intact and are now in the possession of the Planning Department of the City of Portsmouth. The drawings indicate that the building was designed "in house" by the Office of the Chief Engineer, Seaboard Air Line Railway, and drafted by "A. Williamson." No architect's or engineer's stamp appears on any of the drawings however.

The building was designed initially as a five-story masonry structure with classical detailing, yet only the first three stories were constructed in the first building campaign of 1894-95. The top two stories were added in 1914, some twenty years after the design was first drawn. It is interesting to note that the 1914 addition was constructed precisely as the 1894 plans specified despite the twenty-year hiatus.

The brick load-bearing exterior walls were faced with red pressed brick originally, but are today covered with an off-white "Gunite," a cementitious waterproofing coating that gives the building its present textured stucco appearance. The classical modillion cornice along the parapet that can be seen in the early 20th-century photographs was removed in the late 1950s and replaced with a continuous band of corrugated aluminum siding.

On the primary (north) elevation the original entrance into the station was made through two arched openings in the center flanked by eight large semicircular arched windows that created an arcaded effect around the semicircular facade. Each of the arched windows featured an inset muntin that created an outer band of small fixed lights surrounding

(See Continuation Sheet #1)

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1894/1914 **Builder/Architect** Office of the Chief Engineer, Seaboard Air Line Railway

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

#### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Seaboard Coastline Building, a prominent landmark situated on the Portsmouth waterfront, has stood for nearly a century as a major symbol of rail transportation and land-and-sea commerce to the harbor city of Portsmouth, Virginia. Erected in 1894-95 and enlarged in 1914, the structure served as the northern terminus and office headquarters of the Seaboard Air Line until 1958. The significance of the railroad and, in particular, this northern terminal, to the commerce and industry of the region is indisputable: The Seaboard Air Line Railroad transported much of the vast southern cotton crop to the Portsmouth terminal, exchanging for fertilizer and other manufactured products from the north. The railroad provided access to the rich coalfields of West Virginia, the steel industry as far south as Birmingham, Alabama, and the fruit and produce groves of Florida. The strategic siting of the terminal and warehouses along the Portsmouth harbor provided a critical link to the north-south internal shipping route extending from New York to South Carolina, as well as a familiar landmark to the passenger ferries approaching from the neighboring harbors of Norfolk and Newport News.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Seaboard Coastline Building was constructed in 1894 to serve as the northern terminus and office headquarters of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad, an association of five southern railroad companies with tracks spreading from Portsmouth, Virginia, to Atlanta, Georgia (north-south), and from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Rutherfordton, North Carolina (east-west). The confederation of railroads under the Seaboard Air Line included the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad, the Raleigh and Gaston Railroad, the Raleigh and Augusta Railroad, the Georgia and Alabama Railroad, and the Central Carolina Railroad.

The central importance of the railroad to Portsmouth's early history dates back to March 1832 when the Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad Company was incorporated by an act of the General Assembly as the first railroad system in the south.<sup>2</sup> The celebrated civil engineer Colonel Claude Crozet conducted the survey for the establishment of the track route from Portsmouth to Suffolk, a distance of seventeen miles. The first cars pulled by horses began operation in 1834 and were soon after replaced with imported English steam engines. The company was reorganized in 1846 as the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad, eventually to become the Seaboard Air Line Railroad.

(See Continuation Sheet #2)

## 9. Major Bibliographical References (See Continuation Sheet #5)

Board of Trade and Business Men's Association of Norfolk. Information About Norfolk, Portsmouth, Berkeley Virginia and Vicinity. Norfolk: Burke and Gregory, 1905.

Butt, Marshall Wingfield. Portsmouth Under Four Flags: 1752-1961. Portsmouth, VA: Portsmouth Historical Association, 1961.

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property .8 acres

Quadrangle name Norfolk South, VA

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A 18 384340 40771110  
Zone Easting Northing

B           
Zone Easting Northing

C         

D         

E         

F         

G         

H         

Verbal boundary description and justification Boundary Justification: The nominated property consists of .8 acres. This .8 acres is the same property conveyed by deed on February 19, 1985 by the Portsmouth Redevelopment and Housing Authority to Seaboard Coastline Associates. It includes the Seaboard Coastline Building as well as a small (See Continuation Sheet #6)

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code county N/A code

state N/A code county N/A code

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Douglas J. Harnsberger

organization N/A

date July 1985

street & number 3603 Hawthorne Avenue

telephone (804) 321-9350

city or town Richmond

state Virginia 23222

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

   national X state    local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

*H. Bryan Mitchell*

H. Bryan Mitchell, Director

title DIVISION OF HISTORIC LANDMARKS

date August 19, 1985

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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Continuation sheet #1

Item number 7

Page 1

**7. DESCRIPTION -- Architectural Analysis**

a one-over-one double-hung window within the center. Early photographs taken of the building before the 1914 addition, along with the 1914 elevation drawings, confirm that the original windows were one-over-one double-hung type and featured a retractable canvas awning to shade the interior offices from the glare of direct sunlight. The present building retains the original one-over-one double-hung wood sash construction, except at ground level. In 1914, the two innermost arched windows on the north elevation were removed to provide a larger four-bay entrance arcade.

On the present north elevation at ground level the arcade masonry openings are infilled with square panels of glass block to the height of the arch spring. Within the high arches are blind stucco panels. The masonry arches are articulated by three courses of corbelled brickwork which highlight the significance of the entrance arcade. On the fourth and fifth levels the windows are tied together visually with the narrow rectangular frame defined by three bands of corbelled brick similar to the arcade surrounds at ground level. Rectangular raised panels positioned between the fourth and fifth level windows give added emphasis to the upper-story fenestration. An unadorned beltcourse between the third- and fourth-floor levels is continuous around the building's perimeter, similar to the cornice treatment above the fifth floor. Present rehabilitation plans call for the reconstruction of the missing modillion cornice and the removal of the existing aluminum band. A suspended horizontal canopy was added to the northern entrance by the city in 1959. It, too, will be removed as part of the rehabilitation.

The east and west elevations, the long facades, are mirror images of each other. Each facade has two outside bays that project six feet beyond the plane of the central bay. An exposed steel fire stair hangs in the center bay of each elevation. The elevator core, with its visible pent-house mechanical hut, is located at the northeast corner bay of the east elevation. The south (rear) addition is relatively flat and unarticulated, distinguished only by a rudimentary foyer addition added in 1959 and by a fire stair hung in the central bay. A 1914 sectional drawing entitled "Proposed Improvements General Office Building and Passenger Station Portsmouth, Va." indicates that the original flat roof consisted of an eight-inch reinforced slab of "Carey's Magnesia" from which the fifth-floor ceiling was suspended.

The present vacant interior of the Seaboard Coastline Building contains approximately 44,500 square feet of commercial floor space. The interior was stripped of its original finishes and trim in the 1959 conversion to city hall use with the notable exception of the decorative cast-iron railing in the public stairwell in the northeast corner. Otherwise all that remains of the original interior are the reinforced concrete columns laid out on a ten by twenty-foot grid throughout the interior. The floor

(See Continuation Sheet #2)

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**7. DESCRIPTION -- Architectural Analysis**

systems are concrete slab construction poured in place. The ceiling heights are 15'-2" at ground level, 12'-3" from the second to fourth levels, and 10'-9" at the fifth level.

A first-floor plan layout dated 1914 shows that the terminal featured a wide central corridor and general waiting room immediately inside the northern entrance arcade. Smaller waiting rooms divided by race into white and "colored" were positioned along the west wall with a separate entrance provided on the west elevation for the colored waiting room. To the rear (south) of the ground floor the boiler room, a telephone exchange, a mail room, and a supply and linen room serviced the needs of the waiting passengers and the offices on the floors above.

The apparent use of an architectural metaphor--that is, the building shaped in the image of a locomotive--projects a strong, visually distinctive statement on the Portsmouth waterfront. The half-round profile of the north elevation has been considered by some to be a symbolic expression of motion for a structure dedicated to the transportation and commerce industries. The Seaboard Coastline Building may have foreshadowed by thirty years the emergence of the Streamline Moderne Movement in the 1920s and 1930s, when the metaphor of buildings as movable objects streaming through space reached its fullest expression. The bold symbolism of the locomotive's head molded into the facade of the Seaboard Coastline Building remains the building's most dominant architectural attribute and continues to provide an historic reminder of Portsmouth's commercial heritage.

DJH

**8. SIGNIFICANCE -- Historical Background**

In 1839 the legislature authorized the ferry landing to be changed to a new location at the foot of High Street in downtown Portsmouth, a move which foreshadowed the siting, fifty years later, of the Seaboard Coastline Building adjacent to the ferry landing along the Elizabeth River.<sup>3</sup> By the 1870s the prospering railroad served such a vital role in the region's economy that a Norfolk and Portsmouth guidebook boasted its virtues:

The Portsmouth Terminus occupies a central position in the great world of transportation...and has been of great commercial importance as the recipient of the cotton crop carried to us and the fertilizers taken in exchange for that staple. It has erected vast storehouses for both these products and improved docks and wharves for these purposes.

(See Continuation Sheet #3)

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**8. SIGNIFICANCE -- Historical Background**

It is one of the main arteries of our trade, and when it shall have been completed to Atlanta, through a district intermediate, prolific of cotton, will benefit us still further. As it is intervenient between the Piedmont Air Line and the Atlantic Coast Line, it is in position to sustain forcefully this its terminal point.<sup>4</sup>

Another booster publication printed in 1886 emphasized the ability of the railroad to bring to the harbor city the abundant resources of the inland regions:

Beginning at Portsmouth, its northern terminus, it first traverses the famous "trucking" lands whence the Northern and Western markets draw their supplies of early fruits and vegetables; thence it passes through the great forests of North Carolina; proceeding to the westward, immense beds of fine granite and brown sandstone are found; and beyond these rich mineral deposits.<sup>5</sup>

Along with the continued growth of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad in the last decades of the 19th century, the consolidation of the system from five associated lines to one and the establishment of a new headquarters at the northern terminus was undertaken under the leadership of the company's young new president, a Richmond banker named John Skelton Williams.<sup>6</sup> A graduate of the University of Virginia who later served under President Wilson as Assistant Secretary to the Treasury during World War I,<sup>7</sup> Williams recognized the many advantages of consolidating the lines and expanding the system northward. At the time of the construction of the Seaboard Coastline Building in 1894 the system included approximately 960 miles of track. By 1900 the line had expanded north to include the capitol city of Richmond where its Main Street Station terminal opened in the same year. The rapid growth of Portsmouth in the first decade of the 20th century saw the city's population double and the harbor greatly expand both its commercial and naval facilities. The marked prosperity was attributed in part to the Jamestown Exposition of 1907, which featured a grand harborwide celebration, and the annexation of neighboring Scottsville and Prentiss Place as the city's sixth and seventh wards. The population base grew from 17,427 in 1900 to 33,190 by 1910, an increase of 90.4% in ten years. By 1915, the census showed the population nearing 40,000.<sup>8</sup> A local newspaper reporter linked the prosperity of the era directly to the growth of the Seaboard Railroad:

Portsmouth derives advantages only second to those accruing to her from the naval business, as the terminus of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad, which employs so many people as officials, clerks, and workmen. The most extensive im-

(See Continuation Sheet #4)

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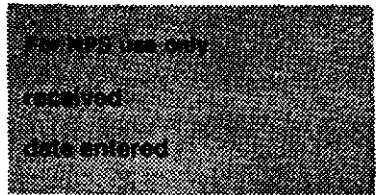
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**8. SIGNIFICANCE -- Historical Background**

provements have been made in the city since the war including the enlargements of the depots, warehouses and dock properties here.

Coinciding with Portsmouth's boom in the first two decades of the 20th century came the 1914 expansion of the Seaboard Coastline Building with two additional stories as originally intended in the 1894 plans. The corresponding expansion of the system and its increasing importance to Portsmouth, its northern terminus, is attested further by the quadruple increase in the length of new track added between 1900 and 1918. When the railroad was put under federal control for wartime purposes in 1918 the system measured over 3,600 miles of active track.<sup>10</sup>

The simultaneous expansion of the harbor was an integral part of the Seaboard's pre-World War I prosperity. As indicated in this 1905 account, the growth of the shipping trade in the Portsmouth harbor owed in part to the abundant facilities for shipping established by the railroad:

The Trans-Atlantic and Coast Steamship Lines have their wharves on both sides of the river. Portsmouth and Norfolk are among the greatest distributing points of exports and imports between the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Gulf of Mexico...so commodious a harbour, such an abundance of anchorage ground and such splendid dockage facilities.<sup>11</sup>

With such excellent cargo handling facilities located immediately adjacent to the Seaboard Coastline Building, raw materials and goods destined for international ports were loaded directly onto waiting ships from the terminal station. Growth of the shipping trade remained strong through World War II. However, with the advance of post-World War II air and interstate transportation systems displacing the railroads as the major means of moving freight and travelers, the Seaboard Coastline Building suffered a precipitous decline in use. The severe fall in passenger use of the railroad and the decision of the Seaboard Railway to move its offices to Richmond in September 1955 resulted in the closing of the terminal by August 1958. The building was donated subsequently to the City of Portsmouth and reopened as a municipal building in November 1958.<sup>12</sup> The city continued to occupy the building until 1980 when the new City Hall was completed. Once again the structure fell vacant. Today the Seaboard Coastline Building is undergoing a three million dollar rehabilitation through private investment and is slated for new commercial use incorporating a diverse complex of apartments, offices, retailers, and a two-story restaurant.

DJH

<sup>1</sup>The Engelhardt Series: Norfolk Portsmouth and the Tidewater County (Norfolk, 1882), page 81.

(See Continuation Sheet #5)

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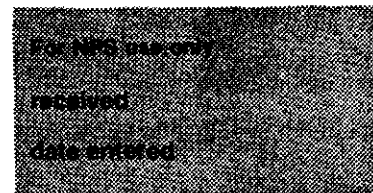
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8. SIGNIFICANCE -- Footnotes

<sup>2</sup>Portsmouth Under Four Flags 1752-1970 (Portsmouth: Portsmouth Historical Association, 1971), page 31.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, page 33.

<sup>4</sup>Norfolk, Portsmouth and the Tidewater County, page 81.

<sup>5</sup>Sketch Book of Portsmouth, Virginia (Portsmouth, VA), page 219.

<sup>6</sup>"Building a Railroad" (1832-1952) (The Newcomen Society in North America, New York), page 19.

<sup>7</sup>History of Virginia (New York: American Historical Society), vol. iv, page 11.

<sup>8</sup>Portsmouth, Virginia Bicentennial 1752-1952 (Portsmouth), page 22.

<sup>9</sup>"History of Portsmouth," Portsmouth Star, January 19, 1936.

<sup>10</sup>"Building a Railroad," page 21.

<sup>11</sup>Information About Norfolk, Portsmouth, Berkeley Virginia and Vicinity (Norfolk: Burke and Gregory), page 3.

<sup>12</sup>Portsmouth Under Four Flags, page 59.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Forrest, William S. Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity. Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1853.  
Guide to Norfolk, Virginia. Norfolk, VA: W.H.T. Squires, 1915.  
History of Virginia. Vol. IV. Chicago: The American Historical Society, 1924.  
Holladay, Mildred M. History of Portsmouth. Portsmouth, VA: The Portsmouth Star, 1936.

(See Continuation Sheet #6)

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Lamb, Robert W., ed. Our Twin Cities of the Nineteenth Century (Norfolk and Portsmouth). Norfolk, VA: Barcroft Publisher, 1887-88.
- Mordecai, John B. A Brief History of the R.F. and P. Railroad.
- Morrison, Andrew, Norfolk, Portsmouth and the Tidewater County. Richmond: Goerge N. Engelhardt, 1889.
- Portsmouth Bicentennial Committee. Portsmouth, Virginia Bicentennial: 1752-1952. Portsmouth, VA: Portsmouth Bicentennial Committee, 1952.
- Smith, John W. "Building a Railroad (1832-1952)." Princeton: Newcomen Publications in North America, 1952.
- Wentz, Robert W., Jr. Portsmouth, A Pictorial History. Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company/Publishers, Inc., 1975.

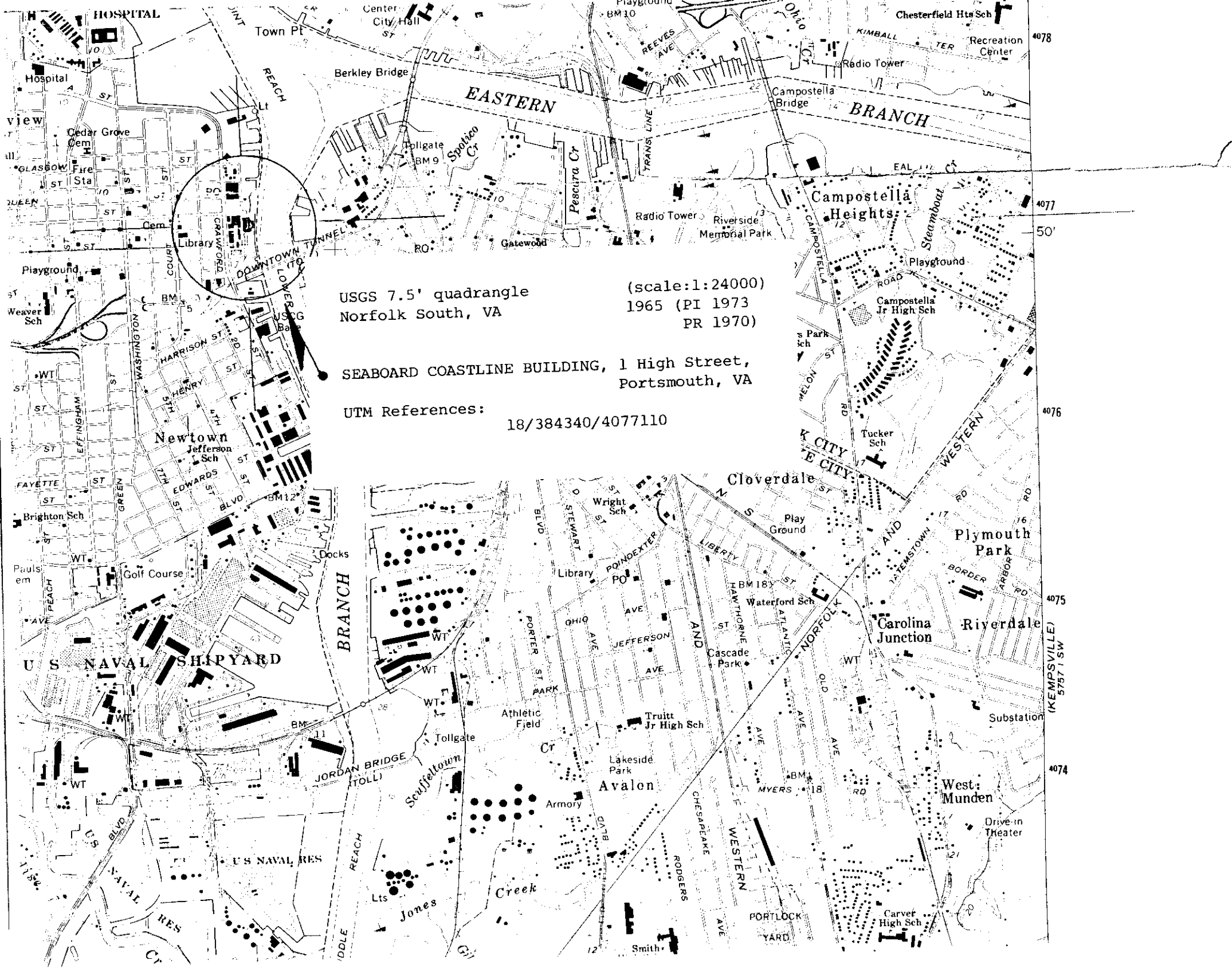
10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA -- Boundary Justification and Verbal Boundary Description

tract of land to the south and east. The eastern boundary is defined by the Elizabeth River.

Verbal Boundary Description:

Beginning at a point in the eastern right-of-way line of Water Street which point is distant south 03° 36' 20" east 83.13 feet from the point of intersection of the eastern right-of-way line of Water Street and the southern right-of-way line of High Street; thence along a curve to the right having a radius of 42.00 feet an arc distance of 107.25 feet to a point; thence north 86° 23' 40" east 31.19 feet to a point; thence south 03° 36' 20" east 40.00 feet to a point; thence north 86° 23' 40" east 84.11 feet to a point in the west face of the existing concrete seawall; thence along the west face of the existing concrete seawall having a radius of 2114.31 feet an arc distance of 110.68 feet to a point; thence south 86° 23' 40" west 79.00 feet to a point; thence south 03° 36' 20" east 73.00 feet to a point; thence south 86° 23' 40" west 103.00 feet to a point in the eastern right-of-way line of Water Street; thence along the eastern right-of-way line of Water Street north 03° 36' 20" west 69.00 feet to a point, thence south 86° 23' 40" west 1.00 foot to a point; thence north 03° 36' 20" west 150.00 feet to a point; thence north 86° 23' 40" east 1.00 foot to a point in the eastern right-of-way line of Water Street; thence along the eastern line of Water Street north 03° 36' 20" west 19.87 feet to the point of beginning.

Deed Book 913, p. 664.



USGS 7.5' quadrangle  
Norfolk South, VA

(scale:1:24000)  
1965 (PI 1973  
PR 1970)

SEABOARD COASTLINE BUILDING, 1 High Street,  
Portsmouth, VA

UTM References:

18/384340/4077110